

## BYRON AND NAPOLEON

Peter Cochran

(A paper given at the University of Gdansk, May 13th 2003)



I don't know whether Napoleon ever read any Byron. He had no English until he went to St Helena,<sup>1</sup> and read history books for preference; no translations of Byron's work appeared in French anyway until 1816, by which time he was many thousands of miles away, imprisoned in the South Atlantic. Previous to that date, the wars for which he had been responsible had frustrated Anglo-French literary relations. He did read a very important book about the Hundred Days, by Byron's friend J.C.Hobhouse – *The Substance of some Letters written by an Englishman resident in Paris during the last Reign of the Emperor Napoleon*, a French translation of which had been published in 1817 under the Bourbons, and its translator, publisher and printer imprisoned. He was only able to obtain his copy with difficulty: Hudson Lowe, his chief English jailor on St Helena, refused at first to let him have it on the grounds that it was offensive about Castlereagh, the English Foreign Minister. Napoleon was able to let Hobhouse know that he valued the work; but whether he ever knew anything, or evinced any curiosity about, Byron, to whom the *Letters* are addressed, I do not know. There are no references to Byron in Barry O'Meara's *Napoleon in Exile* (1822), which Byron read, which is an important subtext for *The Age of Bronze*, and which reports Napoleon's conversations on St Helena in detail.

Byron therefore probably meant little or nothing to Napoleon; but Napoleon meant everything to Byron. As with many of his contemporaries, Napoleon represented something almost new in history: a man who could come from nowhere and change the way people looked at the world and at their places in it. I wish in this paper to trace the way in which his attitude to the Emperor changed, from being a worshipper, via being a critic, to becoming, after Napoleon's death, his would-be alternative, an avatar, or reincarnation.

When he was at Harrow School, Byron had had a bust of Napoleon on his mantelpiece, and fought any boy who disputed his right to do so. Like Pushkin's Eugene Onegin (whose library boasts a similar bust) the idea that his favourite politician was also his own country's greatest enemy did not bother him.

---

1: "The Emperor has acquired the English language, and to me the fame is due of having instructed him in it; in less than thirty lessons he was able to understand the English journals; he now reads every English work" (Las Cases, *Memoirs*, London 1818, 134).

When he visited Spain in 1809 Byron had opportunity to observe at first-hand the effect Napoleon had on a country. It is the only time he comes face to face with what the Napoleonic wars mean to people in the streets – a sure way of demythologising the man, one would think: and sure enough, he spends more ink on the heroic Maid of Zaragoza than he does on Bonaparte:

Is it for this the Spanish maid, aroused,  
Hangs on the willow her unstrung guitar,  
And, all unsexed, the Anlace hath espoused,  
Sung the loud song, and dared the deed of war?  
And she, whom once the semblance of a scar  
Appalled, an owl's 'larum chilled with dread,  
Now views the column-scattering bay'net jar,  
The falchion flash, and o'er the yet warm dead  
Stalks with Minerva's step where Mars might quake to tread.<sup>2</sup>

But the urge to see Napoleon in an alternative perspective did not last. When, after the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, Napoleon seemed to be facing disaster, Byron wrote his most famous poem about him, the *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*. Here he curses Napoleon in archaic language (calling him by his Corsican, not by his French name), accusing him of failure – not so much political and military failure, as of failure as a myth:

But thou – from thy reluctant hand  
The thunderbolt is wrung –  
Too late thou leav'st the high command  
To which thy weakness clung;  
All Evil Spirit as thou art,  
It is enough to grieve the heart  
To see thine own unstrung;  
To think that God's fair world hath been  
The footstool of a thing so mean;

And Earth hath spilt her blood for him,  
Who thus can hoard his own!  
And Monarchs bowed the trembling limb,  
And thanked him for a throne!  
Fair Freedom! we may hold thee dear,  
When thus thy mightiest foes their fear  
In humblest guise have shown.  
Oh! ne'er may tyrant leave behind  
A brighter name to lure mankind!

Thine evil deeds are writ in gore,  
Nor written thus in vain –  
Thy triumphs tell of fame no more,  
Or deepen every stain:  
If thou hadst died as Honour dies.  
Some new Napoleon might arise,  
To shame the world again –  
But who would soar the solar height,  
To set in such a starless night?<sup>3</sup>

We can see from the poet's diaries several examples of the disgust he feels at Napoleon's failure to fall, as Lucifer had fallen:

---

**2:** *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, I 54.

**3:** *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 9-11.

Ah! my poor little pagod, Napoleon, has walked off his pedestal. He has abdicated, they say. This would draw molten brass from the eyes of Zatanai. What! “kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet, and then be baited by the rabble’s curse!” I cannot bear such a crouching catastrophe. I must stick to Sylla, for my modern favourites don’t do – their resignations are of a different kind.<sup>4</sup>

He is angry that Napoleon will not behave like a tragic hero, and kill himself – it is as if Macbeth had survived the fifth act, and lived to fight again! With the *Ode*, he writes a four-line poem comparing Napoleon unfavourably with Prometheus:

Unlike the offence, though like would be the fate,  
His to give life, but *thine* to desolate;  
He stole from Heaven the flame, for which he fell,  
Whilst *thine* was stolen from thy native Hell.

But we are wrong to speak of these poems as Byron’s definite statement about Napoleon: its fame obscures the fact that it is only one pinnacle in a sequence. There are other signs that, while seeming to hold Napoleon at arms’ length, Byron is in fact empathising with him. In his *Journal*, he writes:

Oh for a republic! Hobhouse [*his friend John Cam Hobhouse*] abounds in continental anecdotes of this extraordinary man [*Napoleon*]; all in favour of his intellect and courage, but against his *bonhomie*. No wonder; how should he, who knows mankind well, do otherwise than despise and abhor them?<sup>5</sup>

Byron pays the tribute of misanthropy with authority, being a misanthrope himself. He is assisted in his fellow-feeling by letters from Hobhouse, who has observed Bonaparte in Paris, from close-up. Hobhouse writes to Byron:

I have remarked myself in him one or two little personal peculiarities of behaviour & appearance which recall to me the person whom in spite of all late neglects & forgetfulnesses I love plus quam oculis ... His pensive pale face the sentimental quiet working of his lips and a little labouring with his bosom, added to the [lozenge-]box and its contents made me think myself in Albany opposite your arm chair ...<sup>6</sup>

Hobhouse and Byron shared a fascination for and sympathy with Napoleon with the rest of the Holland House Whig set, one important headquarters of the Westminster Opposition to the Tory Government of Lord Liverpool and Castlereagh.

There was something unbalanced about Byron’s fixation for the French general. On the one hand, in 1814 he writes in his journal, “I don’t know – but I think, *I*, even *I* (an insect compared with this creature), have set my life on casts not a millionth part of this man’s.”<sup>7</sup> On the other, in 1816 his half-sister Augusta writes to Annabella, his now-separated wife, “... even before our dinner he said he considered himself ‘the greatest man existing.’ G[eorge] said, laughing, ‘except Bonaparte.’ The answer was, ‘God, I don’t know that I do except even him.’ I was struck previously with a wildness in his eyes.”<sup>8</sup>

When, in 1815 and 1816, Napoleon had escaped from Elba (where in truth he had never formally been imprisoned) had reconquered France without firing a shot, had lived through his own Hundred Days (which Hobhouse witnessed, and which he had written up in his book, *Letters from Paris*, dedicated to Byron) and had finally been defeated at Waterloo, Byron embarked on a small series of short poems which he published anonymously in newspapers, poems which are less pretentious in style than the *Ode*, and in which we see that his view of

---

4: BLJ IV 93.

5: BLJ III 243-5.

6: *Byron’s Bulldog*, ed. Peter W. Graham, Ohio 1984, p.216.

7: BLJ III 256.

8: HVSV 151.

the Emperor has modified for good, and has become sympathetic and highly respectful. In this next poem an imaginary French soldier contemplates the prospect of Napoleon's exile:

Must thou go – my glorious Chief –  
 Severed from thy faithful few?  
 Who can tell thy warrior's grief –  
 Maddening in that long adieu?  
 Woman's love – and Friendship's Zeal,  
 Dear as both have seemed to me –  
 What are they to all I feel –  
 With a soldier's faith for thee?

Idol of the soldier's soul!  
 First in fight – but mightiest now –  
 Many could a world controul –  
 Thee alone no doom can bow –  
 By thy side for years I dared  
 Death – and envied those who fell,  
 When their dying shout was heard –  
 Blessing him they served so well. –

Would that I were cold with those  
 Since this hour I live to see –  
 When the hearts of coward foes  
 Scarce dare trust a man with thee –  
 Dreading each should set thee free –  
 Oh, though in other dungeons pent –  
 All their chains were light to me  
 Gazing on thy soul unbent. –

Would the sycophants of him  
 Now so deaf to duty's prayer –  
 Were his borrowed Glories dim,  
 In his native darkness share? –  
 Were that world this hour his own –  
 All thou calmly dost resign  
 Could he purchase with that throne  
 Hearts like those that still are thine?

My Chief – my King – my Friend – adieu –  
 Never did I droop before –  
 Never to my Sovereign sue,  
 As his foes I now implore –  
 All I ask is to divide  
 Every peril he must brave –  
 Sharing by the hero's side  
 His fall – his exile – and his grave.<sup>9</sup> –

Byron – as if wishing, like his imaginary French soldier here, to join Napoleon in exile – now leaves England, never to return, and travels Europe, in an expensive carriage modelled on that of Bonaparte himself, which has been captured, and exhibited in London. Napoleon can no longer travel in such a carriage – so he, Byron, will travel in one just like it. On his way to the Rhine (for, with his Napoleonic coach, he is unable to travel through France) he visits the field of Waterloo. In the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* he goes on speaking of Napoleon in tones of awe-struck sympathy:

If, like a tower upon a headland rock,

---

9: *From the French.*

Thou hadst been made to stand or fall alone,  
 Such scorn of man had helped to brave the shock;  
 But men's thoughts were the steps which paved thy throne,  
*Their* admiration thy best weapon shone;  
 The part of Philip's son was thine, not then  
 (Unless aside thy purple had been thrown)  
 Like stern Diogenes to mock at men;  
 For sceptred cynics earth were far too wide a den.<sup>10</sup>

Diogenes was the Greek cynic philosopher who lived in a barrel, and asked Alexander the Great to get out of his light. In Switzerland, Byron writes *Prometheus*, about a figure whom he only recently contrasted with Napoleon, but now identifies with him. Here is the second stanza:

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,  
 To render with thy precepts less  
 The sum of human wretchedness,  
 And strengthen Man with his own mind;  
 But baffled as thou wert from high,  
 Still in thy patient energy,  
 In the endurance, and repulse  
 Of thine impenetrable Spirit,  
 Which Earth and Heaven could not convulse,  
 A mighty lesson we inherit:  
 Thou art a symbol and a sign  
 To Mortals of their fate and force;  
 Like thee, Man is in part divine,  
 A troubled stream from a pure source;  
 And Man in portions can foresee  
 His own funereal destiny;  
 His wretchedness, and his resistance,  
 And his sad unallied existence:  
 To which his Spirit may oppose  
 Itself – an equal to all woes,  
 And a firm will, and a deep sense,  
 Which even in torture can descry  
 Its own centered recompense,  
 Triumphant where it dares defy,  
 And making Death a Victory.<sup>11</sup>

He now sees Napoleon, the foe of all corrupt and obscurantist tyrannies, as having tried to be to Europe what Prometheus had been to mankind – a beacon, a light, one who shows the way and provides an instrument by which darkness can be illuminated. Like Prometheus, he has been defeated and isolated, but his gift cannot be taken away. Reason will finally triumph over Power.

That Napoleon had also been ruthless, self-aggrandising, and obsessed with Power himself – anxious to be a mortal Zeus, not a Prometheus – makes no difference. The source may indeed be corrupt, but the pure quality of the stream is unaltered. Byron may have been assisted in his identification by the fact that Napoleon had, as a Corsican *parvenu*, the same relationship with French society as he, a poor Scots boy ennobled by chance, had with English.

Next, in Venice, Byron rediscovers his comic voice, which had been mute during his Years of Fame in London, and, in *Beppo*, the first of his great ottava rima satires, he writes:

Crushed was Napoleon by the Northern Thor,  
 Who knocked his army down with icy hammer,

---

**10:** *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III 41.

**11:** *Prometheus*, 35-59.

Stopped by the *Elements* – like a Whaler, or  
 A blundering Novice in his new French Grammar;  
 Good cause had he to doubt the chance of War,  
 And as for Fortune – but *I* dare not d—n her,  
 Because, were I to ponder to Infinity,  
 The More I should believe in her Divinity.<sup>12</sup>

The new, playful, facetious tone allows Byron to make even bigger statements than before. We can see that he empathises with Napoleon, as a fellow fool of Fortune.

*Don Juan*, Byron's greatest poem, shows Napoleon at first "bustled into triviality"<sup>13</sup> into the seventh line of its second stanza: but later we see him gradually reassume his rightful place in Byron's mind, until Byron can, in a joke which says much, call himself a Napoleon:

In twice five years the "greatest living poet",  
 Like to the Champion in the fisty ring,  
 Is called on to support his claim or show it,  
 Although 'tis an imaginary thing;  
 Even I, Albeit I'm sure I did not know it,  
 Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king,  
 Was reckoned a considerable time  
 The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. –

But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero  
 My Leipsic, and my Mont Saint Jean seems Cain;  
 "La Belle Alliance" of dunces down at zero,  
 Now that the Lion's fall'n, may rise again;  
 But I will fall at once as fell my Hero,  
 Nor reign at all, or as a Monarch reign,  
 Or to some lonely Isle of Jailors go,  
 With turncoat Southey as my turnkey Lowe.<sup>14</sup>

Robert Southey was the Poet Laureate who had hymned Wellington's victory at Waterloo. If Napoleon was to Byron a positive alter ego, an ideal by which to measure himself, creating a militaristic and political version of his own poetic achievement, then Southey was a negative alter ego – the representative of everything corrupt he might have become in poetic terms. And Count Las Cases, who shared Napoleon's imprisonment on St Helena, writes of Sir Hudson Lowe, the English governor there ("my turnkey Lowe"):

Every thing, even down to the most petty details, betrays the personal character and disposition of our gaoler; he puts into our hands the journals in which we are harshly treated, and keeps from us those in which we are spoken of in less hostile terms; he retains the works which are favourable to us, under the pretext that they did not come through the hands of the ministry, and he displays the utmost zeal in furnishing us with every libel against us from his own private library."<sup>15</sup>

To be imprisoned on an imagined island with Southey as one's "jailor" is thus to be forced to stare constantly into a distorting mirror, the image in which is fashioned by one's worst enemies.

Lastly, late in 1822, Byron writes *The Age of Bronze*. By this time Napoleon is dead, and the poem opens with a long section about his exile on the cramped, disease-ridden sub-tropical "Isle of Jailors":

Is this the Man who scourged or feasted Kings?

---

12: *Beppo*, st 61.

13: Malcolm Kelsall, *Byron's Politics*, Brighton: Harvester Press 1987, p. 152.

14: *Don Juan*, XI 55-56.

15: Las Cases, *Memoirs*, 1818, pp. 149-50.

Behold the scales in which his Fortune hangs,  
 A Surgeon's statement, and an Earl's harangues!  
 A bust delayed, a book refused, can shake  
 The Sleep of Him who kept the world awake.  
 Is this indeed the Tamer of the Great,  
 Now Slave of all could tease or irritate –  
 The paltry Jailor and the prying Spy,  
 The staring stranger with his note-book nigh?  
 Plunged in a dungeon, he had still been great;  
 How low, how little was this middle State,  
 Between a prison and a palace, where  
 How few could feel for what he had to bear!  
 Vain his complaint – my Lord presents his bill,  
 His food and wine were doled out duly still;  
 Vain was his sickness – never was a Clime  
 So free from Homicide – to doubt's a crime;  
 And the stiff Surgeon, who maintained his cause,  
 Hath lost his place, and gained the World's applause.  
 But Smile – though all the pangs of brain and heart  
 Disdain, defy the tardy aid of Art;  
 Though, save the few fond friends, and imaged face,  
 Of that fair boy his Sire shall ne'er embrace,  
 None stand by his low bed – though even the Mind  
 Be wavering, which long awed and awes Mankind; –  
 Smile – for the fettered Eagle breaks his Chain,  
 And higher Worlds than this are his again.<sup>16</sup> –

Napoleon is no longer a figure of myth, no longer an heroic combination of Prometheus and Macbeth, but a real man, who can be “teazed” and “irritated” by “prying spies” and “stiff surgeons.” However, in death he is an eagle once again.

Later in the poem, Byron addresses Tsar Alexander I of Russia (a ruler, and a country, which he despises):

Fatal to Goths are Xeres' sunny fields,  
 Think'st thou to thee Napoleon's victor yields?  
 Better reclaim thy desarts, turn thy Swords  
 To ploughshares, s have and wash thy Bashkir hordes,  
 Redeem thy lands from Slavery and the knout,  
 Than follow headlong in the fatal route,  
 To infest the clime whose skies and laws are pure  
 With thy foul legions. Spain wants no manure,  
 Her soil is fertile, but she feeds no foe;  
 Her Vultures, too, were gorged long ago;  
 And wouldst thou furnish them with fresher prey?  
 Alas! thou wilt not conquer, but purvey.  
 I am Diogenes, though Russ and Hun  
 Stand between mine and many a Myriad's Sun;  
 But were I not Diogenes, I'd wander  
 Rather a worm than *such* an Alexander!  
 Be slaves who will, the Cynic shall be free;  
 His tub hath tougher walls than Sinopè;  
 Still will he hold his lanthorn up to scan  
 The face of monarchs for an “honest man.”<sup>17</sup>

Where, in *Childe Harold*, Napoleon had been Diogenes, the cynic philosopher who despised the Great, here Byron has taken over his role – has become both Diogenes and

---

16: *The Age of Bronze*, 62-88.

17: *The Age of Bronze*, 464-83.

Napoleon, now that Napoleon can no longer be himself. Byron is speaking with what he considers to be Napoleon's voice, now the authentic voice is silenced. It is a huge change of direction since the *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*. Consider how Byron once treated, and now treats, the figure of Napoleon's second wife, Marie-Louise, the Austrian Emperor's daughter. Here is stanza thirteen of the 1814 *Ode*:

And she, proud Austria's mournful flower,  
 Thy still imperial bride;  
 How bears her breast the torturing hour?  
 Still clings she to thy side?  
 Must she too bend, must she too share  
 Thy late repentance, long despair,  
 Thou throneless Homicide?  
 If still she loves thee, hoard that gem, –  
 'Tis worth thy vanished Diadem!<sup>18</sup>

Napoleon, Byron implies in 1814, is lucky to have such a wife. However, by 1822 it is well-known that Marie Louise (now Arch-Duchess of Parma) has been sleeping – at the instigation of Metternich, and with her father's consent – with von Neipperg, the one-eyed but sexy Austrian Count. Byron writes:

Enough of this – a sight more mournful woos  
 The averted eye of the reluctant Muse.  
 The Imperial daughter, the Imperial bride,  
 The imperial Victim – Sacrifice to Pride,  
 The Mother of the Hero's Hope, the boy,  
 The young Astyanax of modern Troy;  
 The still pale Shadow of the loftiest Queen  
 That Earth has yet to see, or e'er hath seen;  
 She flits amidst the phantoms of the hour,  
 The theme of Pity, and the Wreck of Power.  
 Oh, cruel Mockery! Could not Austria spare  
 A daughter? What did France's widow there? –  
 Her fitter place was by St. Helen's wave,  
 Her only throne is in Napoleon's grave.  
 But, no, – she still must hold a petty reign,  
 Flanked by her formidable Chamberlain;  
 The Martial Argus, whose not hundred Eyes  
 Must watch her through these paltry pageantries.  
 What though she share no more, and shared in vain,  
 A Sway surpassing that of Charlemagne,  
 Which swept from Moscow to the Southern Seas,  
 Yet still she rules the pastoral realm of Cheese,  
 Where Parma views the traveller resort  
 To note the trappings of her mimic Court.<sup>19</sup>

Byron researched his Napoleonic material thoroughly – more thoroughly than he did for *The Island*, the pseudo-Polynesian fantasy he wrote for the same new, down-market audience for which he wrote *The Age of Bronze*. In the book *Napoleon in Exile, A Voice from St. Helena*, by Napoleon's surgeon on the island, Barry O'Meara, he would have found the following sad statement, made by Napoleon:

“I believe ... that Marie Louise is just as much a state prisoner as I am myself, except that more attention is paid to decorum in the restraints imposed on her. I have always had occasion to praise

---

18: *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 13.

19: *The Age of Bronze*, 727-750.



the conduct of my good Louise, and I believe that it is totally out of her power to assist me; moreover, she is young and timorous.’”<sup>20</sup>

Hector is unaware that his Andromache is unfaithful – and not with a Pyrrhus, but with a Polyphemus!

To close: O’Meara also reports the ex-Emperor as saying this:

“The two grand objects of my policy were, first, to re-establish the kingdom of Poland, as a barrier against the Russians, that I might save Europe from those barbarians of the north; and next, to expel the Bourbons from Spain, and establish a constitution which would have rendered the nation free.”<sup>21</sup>

Byron also knew Napoleon as a friend to Poland, a country with which he had great sympathy himself, seeing her as a victim of that Russian imperialism which Napoleon had, with fatal results, tried to combat, “yoking the silver eagles with the gold,” as Mickiewicz has it. Napoleon’s motives for liking Poland were impure, however. Byron’s motives for liking Poland were truly disinterested.

---

**20:** O’Meara, II, 159.

**21:** O’Meara, II, 120.